

FBI 9/11 COVERUP

Is a 9/11 Attack Facilitator Alive and Well in London?

Thursday, February 23, 2012
Abulaziz al-Hijji in Florida

A Saudi businessman suspected of being involved in the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks is now living in London, where he works for the Saudi Arabian oil company Aramco.

Abdulaziz al-Hijji and his wife, Anoud, were living in the gated community of Prestancia near Sarasota, Florida, in 2001, when they abruptly left the country only two weeks before the attacks. The couple left behind three cars and a home filled with furniture, food and personal mail, as well as a private safe found wide open.



On tip from a local security guard and a neighbor, and based upon photos of the license plates of cars that entered the community gates, federal agents raided the home. The [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI) determined that the residence may have been visited by some of the 9/11 hijackers, including leader Mohamed Atta, and that phone calls may have been exchanged between the terrorists and the al-Hijjis. Two of the 9/11 pilots trained at Venice Airport 14 miles from Prestancia.

But the FBI later cleared the al-Hijjis of any involvement in the plot and al-Hijji has denied any connection.

Former Florida Senator Bob Graham, who was chairman of the Senate intelligence committee at the time, has questioned the FBI's investigation of the al-Hijjis, claiming the bureau was not as thorough in its probe as federal agents claimed and that the FBI has continued to withhold information related to the Prestancia house.

-Noel Brinkerhoff

London-Based Oil Executive Linked to 9/11 Hijackers

A Saudi Arabian accused of associating with several of the September 11 hijackers and who disappeared from his home in the United States a few weeks before the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, is in London working for his country's state oil company.



From left: hijack pilots Mohamed Atta, Marwan Al-Shehhi and Ziad Jarrah were all said to have visited the home in Sarasota while learning to fly at nearby Venice Airport Photo: GETTY

By Anthony Summers, Neil Tweedie and Dan Christensen in Miami

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Abdulaziz al-Hijji and his wife Anoud left three cars at their luxurious home in a gated community in Sarasota, Florida — one of them new — and flew to Saudi Arabia in

August 2001. The refrigerator was full of food; furniture and clothing were left behind; and the swimming pool water was still circulating.

Security records of cars passing through a checkpoint at the Prestancia gated community indicated that Mr al-Hijji's home, 4224 Escondito Circle, had been visited a number of times by Mohamed Atta, the leader of the

19-strong hijack team, who piloted American Airlines Flight 11 into the North Tower of the World Trade Centre in 2001.

The logs also indicated that Marwan Al-Shehhi, who crashed United Airlines Flight 175 into the South Tower, and Ziad Jarrah, who was at the controls of United Airlines Flight 93 when it crashed in a field in Pennsylvania, had visited the house.

All three men had trained to fly at Venice Airport, which is 19 miles from Sarasota.

A US counter-terrorist agent told The Daily Telegraph: "The registration numbers of vehicles that had passed through the Prestancia community's north gate in the months before 9/11, coupled with the identification documents shown by incoming drivers on request, showed that Mohamed Atta and several of his fellow hijackers, and another Saudi suspect still at large, had visited 4224 Escondito Circle."

The [other] suspect was Adnan Shukrijumah, an al-Qaeda operative who is on the FBI's Most Wanted list, with a \$5 million bounty on his head. .A decade after the world's worst terrorist attack, which claimed the lives of 3,000 people, Mr al-Hijji is resident in London, working for the European subsidiary of Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia's state oil company. Described as a career counsellor, he is based in the offices of Aramco Overseas Company UK Limited and lives in an expensive flat in central London.

In email correspondence with the Telegraph, Mr al-Hijji strongly denied any involvement in the plot, writing: "I have neither relation nor association with any of those bad people/criminals and the awful crime they did. 9/11 is a crime against the USA and all humankind and I'm very saddened and oppressed by these false allegations.

"I love the USA. My kids were born there, I went to college and university there, I spent a good portion of my life there and I love it."

Mr al-Hijji's account is supported by the FBI, which has stated: "At no time did the FBI develop evidence that connected the family members to any of the 9/11 hijackers ... and there was no connection found to the 9/11 plot."

Bob Graham, a former US senator who, in addition to co-chairing the congressional inquiry into 9/11, was chairman of the US senate intelligence committee at the time, disputes the FBI denials. He has long believed that there was Saudi support for the 19 terrorists, 15 of whom were subjects of the kingdom. He cites two secret documents to which he has recently had access.

The first document, Graham says, is "not consistent with the public statements of the FBI that there was no connection between the 9/11 hijackers and the Saudis at the Sarasota home. Both documents indicate that the investigation was not the robust inquiry claimed by the FBI."

Mr al-Hijji, 38, moved with his family to Britain in 2003, setting up home in a rented four-bedroom detached house in the Southampton suburb of Totton. His stay there appears to have been uneventful.

The al-Hijjis' abrupt departure from Sarasota aroused the suspicion of their next-door neighbour, Patrick Gallagher. He emailed the FBI within two days of 9/11 to report the disappearance of the couple and their young children.

Reports released recently by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement refer to the "suspicious manner and timing" of the family's departure.

One document states: "In mid-August 2001 the above subjects purchased a new vehicle and renewed the registration on several other vehicles. On Aug 27 2001 a moving truck appeared and moved the subjects out of the house. Left behind were the vehicles and numerous personal belongings, including food, medicine, bills, baby clothing etc."

The document goes on to state that **Mr al-Hijji and Esam Ghazzawi**, his father-in-law and the owner of the Escondito Circle house, **had been "on the FBI watch list" prior to 9/11.**

Mr al-Hijji described the allegations against him as "just cheap talk" and denied having abandoned his home in undue haste, explaining: "No, no, no. Absolutely not true. We were trying to secure the [Aramco] job. It was a good opportunity."

He said his wife and children followed him out to Saudi Arabia a few weeks after he left. She and his American-born mother-in-law had been questioned by the FBI when they returned to the United States to settle the family's affairs.

But he was not questioned when he returned to America for a two-month period in 2005.

Did FBI Hide 9/11 Info from Congress about Saudi Couple in Florida?

Thursday, September 15, 2011



Former al-Hijjii Home in Florida (photo: Trulia.com)

The [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) (FBI) probed a possible connection between a Saudi family living in Florida and the hijackers who carried out the September 11 attacks, but **never informed Congress or the 9/11 Commission about the investigation.**

Uncovered by the news website [BrowardBulldog.org](#), the previously unreported story goes something like this:

Less than two weeks before the 9/11 attacks, Abdulazzi al-Hijjii and his wife, Anoud, who were residents of the gated community of Prestancia near Sarasota, abruptly fled their home, leaving behind three cars and a home filled with furniture, food and personal mail, as well as a private

safe left wide open. The home was owned by Anoud's father, Esam Ghazzawi and his American-born wife, Deborah.

Tipped off by the security chief for the gated community, the FBI stormed the home. They eventually determined, based upon photos of the license plates of cars that entered the gates, that the residence may have been visited by some of the 9/11 hijackers, including leader Mohamed Atta, and that phone calls may have been exchanged between the terrorists and the Hijjiiis.

Former U.S. Senator Bob Graham, the Florida Democrat who co-chaired the 9/11 Commission, said **the FBI never shared details of the investigation with him or others** working on the special inquiry. Nor did the federal law enforcement agency tell lawmakers on Capitol Hill.

-Noel Brinkerhoff

-  [ONLINE EXTRA: 9/11 -- 10 years later](#)

FBI “Investigated” Another Sarasota Link to 9/11



Two weeks before 9/11, a Saudi family abruptly vacated their home in Prestancia at 4224 Escondito Circle. Their action later raised questions about what they might have known.

STAFF PHOTO / ROBERT ECKHART

By [Zac Anderson](#) & [Robert Eckhart](#)

Newly revealed details from an FBI investigation into the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks link a Saudi family living in an upscale Sarasota neighborhood to the hijackers, who made multiple visits to the Sarasota home before 9/11.

The Saudi family appear to have fled their home in the gated Palmer Ranch community of Prestancia two weeks before Sept. 11, raising suspicions about whether they had knowledge of the impending attacks. The family left clothes hanging in closets, food in the refrigerator, toys floating in the pool and three cars in the driveway and garage.

Details of the investigation were uncovered by author Anthony Summers and Dan Christensen, editor of Browardbulldog.org. Their story, which relied largely on an unnamed counterterrorism agent as well as former Prestancia security guard Larry Berberich, was published Thursday on Christensen's website and in the Miami Herald.

The story documents yet another potential connection between Southwest Florida and the Sept. 11 attacks.

Three of the four men who piloted planes on Sept. 11 attended flight schools in Venice and lived there until shortly before the attacks. Two of them, Sept. 11 mastermind Mohammed Atta and Ziad Jarrah, were found to have visited the Saudi family in Prestancia based on photos of their license plates taken at the security gate and information the men gave gate guards.

Neighbors did not grow suspicious of the Saudi family until after Sept. 11, when their abrupt departure days earlier raised questions.

At least three Sarasota residents, including a neighbor, a security guard and a real estate agent, called the FBI to report the Saudi family's odd behavior. Counterterrorism experts later pieced together the family's connection to the hijackers, but by then the Saudis had returned to their home country.

In a Thursday interview with the Herald Tribune, a former neighbor and close friend of the Saudi family who visited their house nearly every day for a few years in the mid-90s said she always wondered what had become of her old friends.

Sarasota High School graduate Carla DiBello, 27, said she became close with Anoud al-Hijjii, the young Saudi mother.

Anoud, who was only 18 or 19 at the time, treated DiBello like a younger sister and DiBello enjoyed playing with the family's young twins, Esam and Hamsa.

DiBello and Anoud went to movies together, shopped at the mall and took trips to Busch Gardens.

DiBello said Anoud was a heavysset, pious woman who prayed multiple times a day. But in many ways she and her husband, Abdulazzi, were very Westernized. She sported a 10-carat, heart-shaped diamond ring. He liked Polo shirts and expensive jeans. They wore designer clothes, drove a Range Rover and a Lexus, loved American movies and decorated their home lavishly.

Abdulazzi often walked next door to visit with DiBello's father, Tom, and drink liquor, something Anoud did not approve of.

"Anoud would make him go pray and be more involved in their culture," Carla DiBello said.

Tom DiBello, an insurance salesman who now lives near Fort Lauderdale, said Abdulazzi was affable and outgoing.

DiBello got the impression that Abdulazzi, who at times said he was a business student but also talked about exporting furniture, was coasting on his wife's family money.

Anoud's father, Esam Ghazzawi, is a well-known interior designer and financier in Saudi Arabia who owned multiple properties in the United States, including the Prestancia home. The family bragged that Ghazzawi had a close relationship with the Saudi royal family.

Carlo DiBello said she met Ghazzawi at least four times and described him as "very eccentric." He enjoyed big family dinners and always had a large security detail.

Once, DiBello was shopping with the family around the time that Ab Roller exercise gadgets became popular.

Ghazzawi "ordered 40 or 50 of them at once and said he wanted them at all of his homes and offices around the world," DiBello said.

Abdulazzi's easy manner did not raise suspicions, but Tom DiBello said in hindsight some of their conversations were odd.

"He felt Americans came to their country to steal their oil and take their money," DiBello said. "He said he did not like Americans because of what we did to his country. He said, 'How would you like it if we came to your country and did that?' "

The al-Hijjii family did not socialize widely and did not belong to Prestancia's posh country club or take advantage of the world-class golf course, DiBello said.

Carla DiBello, who now works in Los Angeles as a television producer for the show "Keeping Up With the Kardashians," said she lost touch with the family around 1999 after she entered high school and moved out of Prestancia.

House for sale

Sarasota real estate agent Louise Tessier may have been one of the last local residents to have contact with the al-Hijjii family before they disappeared.

Tessier sat down with the couple in their family room in May 2001 after they contacted her about selling the Prestancia home.

Anoud told Tessier they wanted to sell the house because a brother was headed to college in Tampa.

Tessier didn't ask too many follow-up questions.

"We were never on a comfortable footing," she said. "You couldn't talk to them as easy as you could with other people."

After the Sept. 11 attacks, Tessier got a tip that the family had abandoned their Prestancia home. She tried to contact them by phone and email. She remembers calling a phone number in Saudi Arabia but never getting through to the right people.

When Tessier went to check out the house, she saw that the pool was green and a car was parked in the driveway.

"There was stuff in the house that shouldn't have been left in the house," she said. "And I can't remember if I found food in the refrigerator or what but it was just like they had abandoned the whole thing."

She went back to her office and called the FBI.

"They knew who I meant," Tessier said. "Didn't have any problem getting that through to them. It made me feel like they knew what was going on."

A few months later, Tessier said the FBI called her back and told her that the al-Hijjis were "cleared." The FBI said that she could go through with the sale, and that the federal government would not be seizing the house.

But Tessier says she had had enough of the family.

"I just shut down on the whole thing. I didn't want to have anything to do with it."

What has become of the al-Hijji and Ghazzawi families since they fled the United States is unclear.

The Justice Department, the lead agency that investigated the attacks, refused to comment, saying it would discuss only information already released.

The al-Hijji and Ghazzawi families could not be reached for comment. The house was sold in 2003, records show.

Inquiry kept secret

The FBI investigation into the al-Hijji and Ghazzawi families was not reported to Congress or mentioned in the 9/11 Commission Report.

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, the Florida Democrat who cochaired the bipartisan congressional joint inquiry into the attacks, said he should have been told about the findings, saying it "opens the door to a new chapter of investigation as to the depth of the Saudi role in 9/11. . . . No information relative to the named people in Sarasota was disclosed."

For Graham, who served as Florida's governor from 1979 to 1987, the connections between the hijackers and residents raise questions about whether other Saudi nationals in Florida might have known of the impending attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people.

The FBI investigation began the month after 9/11 when Larry Berberich, senior administrator and security officer of Prestancia, reported that the couple, living with their small children at the three-bedroom home at 4224 Escondito Circle, had left in a hurry in a white van, probably on Aug. 30.

They abandoned three recently registered vehicles, including a brand-new Chrysler PT Cruiser, in the garage and driveway.

As an adviser to the Sarasota County sheriff, Berberich was with the group that received President George W. Bush during his truncated visit to a Sarasota school on the morning of 9/11. He alerted sheriff's deputies.

Patrick Gallagher, one of the Saudis' neighbors, had become suspicious even earlier, and had fired off an email to the FBI on the day of the attacks. Gallagher said law enforcement officers arrived and began an investigation, with agents swarming "all over the place, in their blue jackets," he recalled.

Berberich and a senior counterterrorism agent said they were able to get into the abandoned house, ultimately finding "there was mail on the table, dirty diapers in one of the bathrooms ... all the toiletries still in place ... all their clothes hanging in the closet ... TVs ... opulent furniture, equal or greater in value than the house ... the pool running, with toys in it."

The counterterrorism officer, who requested that his name not be disclosed, said agents went on to make some troubling discoveries: Phone records and the Prestancia gate records linked the house on Escondito Circle to the hijackers.

The links were not only to Atta and his hijack pilots, the agent said, but to 11 other terrorist suspects, including Walid al-Shehri, one of the men who flew with Atta on the first plane to strike the World Trade Center.

But it was the gate records at the Prestancia development that produced the most telltale information.

People who arrived by car had to give their names and the home's address they were visiting. Gate staff would sometimes ask to see a driver's license and note the name, said Berberich.

More importantly, he added, the license plates of cars pulling through the gate were photographed.

Atta is known to have used variations of his name, but the license plate of the car he owned was on record.

The vehicle and name information on Atta and Jarrah fit that of drivers entering Prestancia on their way to visit the home at Escondito Circle, said Berberich and the counterterrorism officer.

County property records identify the owners of the house at the time as Ghazzawi and his American-born wife, Deborah, both with a P.O. box in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and another address in the capital, Riyadh.

The sudden departure two weeks before 9/11 was tracked in detail by the FBI after the attacks, the counterterrorism agent said. First they traveled to a Ghazzawi property in Arlington, Va., then — with Esam Ghazzawi — to Riyadh by way of Dulles and Heathrow airports.

The counterterrorism agent said that Ghazzawi and al-Hijji had been on a watch list at the FBI, and that a U.S. agency involved in tracking terrorist funds was interested in both men even before 9/11.

About a year after the family vacated the home, the FBI made an attempt to lure the owner back. Scott McKay, a Sarasota lawyer for the Prestancia homeowners' association in its claim for unpaid dues on the property, said the FBI tried to get him to bring the Saudis back for the transaction.

"They didn't say you must do this. It was more like, 'But we'd really, really like you to make this happen,'" said McKay said.

McKay said he tried to get the Ghazzawis to sign the necessary documents in person, but the ploy failed because the documents could legally be signed elsewhere using a notary. Records show Ghazzawi's signature was notarized by the vice consul of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon in September 2003. Deborah Ghazzawi's signature was notarized in Riverside County, Calif.

Staff writer Michael Braga contributed to this report, which contains information first reported by Browardbulldog.org and the Miami Herald.

[FBI investigated another Sarasota link to 9/11 By Zac Anderson and Robert Eckhart](#)

Graham: FBI's public statements are in conflict with still secret records of Sarasota 9/11 probe

Filed under [9/11](#), [A1 Top Story](#)

By Dan Christensen and Anthony Summers



Former Senator Bob Graham

Former Florida Senator Bob Graham has seen two classified FBI documents that he says raise new questions about the Bureau's once secret investigation of a possible Saudi support operation for the 9/11 hijackers in Sarasota.

Graham would not disclose the content of the documents, which are marked "Secret," but said the information they contain is at odds with the FBI's public statements that there was no connection between the hijackers and Saudis then living in Sarasota.

"There are significant inconsistencies between the public statements of the FBI in September and what I read in the classified documents," Graham said.

"One document adds to the evidence that the investigation was not the robust inquiry claimed by the FBI," Graham said. "An important investigative lead was not pursued and unsubstantiated statements were accepted as truth."

Whether the 9/11 hijackers acted alone, or whether they had support within the U.S., remains an unanswered question – one that began to be asked as soon as it became known that 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens. It was underlined when Congress's bipartisan Joint Inquiry, which Democrat Graham co-chaired, released its public report in July 2003. The final 28 pages, regarding possible foreign support for the terrorists, were censored in their entirety—on President George W. Bush's instructions.

Graham said the two classified FBI documents that he saw, dated 2002 and 2003, were prepared by an agent who had participated in the Sarasota investigation. He said the agent suggested that another federal agency be asked to join the investigation, but that the idea was "rejected."

Graham attempted in recent weeks to contact the agent, only to find the man had been instructed by FBI headquarters not to talk.

LICENSE PLATES TIED TO HIJACKERS

The FBI-led investigation a decade ago focused on Abdulaziz al-Hijji and his wife, Anoud, who moved out of their home in the upscale, gated community of Prestancia and left the country in the weeks before 9/11. The couple, who had lived there since about 1995, left behind three cars and numerous personal belongings such as furnishings, clothes, medicine and food, according to law enforcement records. A concerned neighbor contacted the FBI.

Analysis of Prestancia gatehouse visitor logs and photographs of license tags showed that vehicles driven by several of the future hijackers had visited the al-Hijji home at 4224 Escondito Circle, according to a counterterrorism officer – speaking on condition of anonymity – and former Prestancia administrator Larry Berberich.

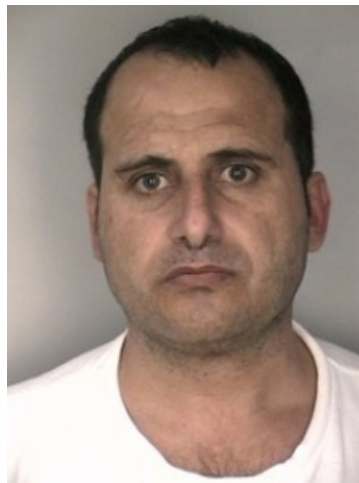
The home was owned by Mrs. Al-Hijji's father, Esam Ghazzawi, an adviser to Prince Fahd bin Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud, nephew of King Fahd and a noted racehorse owner. Prince Fahd died in July 2001.

Al-Hijji, who now lives and works in London, this month called 9/11 “a crime against the USA and all humankind” and said he was “saddened and oppressed by these false allegations.” He also said it was “not true” that Mohamed Atta and other 9/11 hijackers visited him at his Sarasota home.

The FBI backs up al-Hijji. After initially declining to comment, the Bureau confirmed that it did investigate but said it found nothing sinister. Agents, however, have refused to answer reporters' specific questions about its investigation or its findings about the Prestancia gate records.

The FBI reiterated its position in a February 7 letter that denied a Freedom of Information Act request seeking records from its Sarasota probe. The denial said their release “could constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.”

“At no time during the course of its investigation of the attacks, known as the PENTTBOM investigation, did the FBI develop credible evidence that connected the address at 4224 Escondito Circle, Sarasota, Florida to any of the 9/11 hijackers,” wrote records section chief David M. Hardy.



Wissam Hammoud

Newly released Florida Department of Law Enforcement documents, however, state that an informant told the FBI in 2004 that al-Hijji had considered Osama bin Laden a “hero” and may have known some of the hijackers. The informant, Wissam Hammoud, also said al-Hijji once introduced him to Adnan El Shukrijumah, the ex-Broward resident and suspected al Qaeda operative on the FBI’s Most Wanted list.

In 2003, the FBI asked Sarasota lawyer Scott McKay, who was involved in the sale of the property, to convince al-Hijji’s father-in-law, Ghazzawi, to return to the U.S. to sign documents. The ploy, intended to get Ghazzawi back for questioning, failed when Ghazzawi instead signed the sale documents at the American consulate in Beirut.

The counterterrorism agent said Ghazzawi and al-Hijji had been on a watch list at the FBI. The agent believed that a U.S. agency involved in tracking terrorist funds had been interested in both men even before 9/11.

The FBI interviewed Al-Hijji’s wife, Anoud, and her American-born mother, Deborah Ghazzawi, when they returned to Sarasota briefly in 2003. The women denied involvement with the 9/11 terrorists, and said the couple’s 2001 return flights to Saudi Arabia had been booked well in advance.

Al-Hijji told London’s *Daily Telegraph*, which worked the story with *Broward Bulldog*, that he returned to the U.S. for two months in 2005 to study in Houston, but was not questioned by the FBI. Asked why federal agents had questioned his wife and mother-in-law, he said he had “no idea.”

GRAHAM ASKS FOR HELP

Last September, FBI spokesmen also disputed Graham’s assertion that Congress was never told about the Sarasota investigation.

That prompted Graham to ask the FBI for assistance in locating in the National Archives the Sarasota-related files that were allegedly turned over to Congress. Instead, after what Graham said were two months in which the FBI was “either unwilling or unable” to help find the records, the Bureau suddenly turned over two documents to the Senate Intelligence Committee, which Graham once headed and where he still has access. It is those documents that Graham has said are inconsistent with the FBI denials.

Graham shared this development with the Obama White House, which responded by setting up a meeting between Graham and FBI Deputy Director Sean Joyce. Joyce told Graham he “didn’t want to talk” about the Sarasota episode. Graham was assured, however, that he would shortly be shown material that supported the FBI’s denials, and a further meeting was arranged with an FBI aide.

In December, Graham said, the scheduled meeting was abruptly canceled and he was told he would be allowed no further access to FBI information about Sarasota.



9/11 Commission co-chairs Lee Hamilton (left) and Thomas Kean

Graham said the Joint Inquiry was not the only national investigative body kept in the dark about Sarasota. He said the co-chairs of the 9/11 Commission, Republican Thomas Kean and Democrat Lee Hamilton, have told him they also were unaware of it.

Kean, a former New Jersey governor, told Graham the Commission would have “worked it hard,” because the hypothesis that the hijackers completed the planning alone was “implausible.”

Kean did not return several phone messages seeking comment. But Hamilton, a former Indiana congressman, confirmed this month that he learned nothing about the Sarasota matter while serving as vice-chair of the 9/11 Commission.

Graham sees the information now emerging about Sarasota as ominously similar to discoveries his Inquiry made in California. Leads there indicated that the first two hijackers to reach the U.S., Saudis Khalid al-Mihdhar and Nawaf al-Hazmi, received help first from a diplomat at the Saudi consulate in Los Angeles and then from another Saudi, one of whom helped Mihdhar and Hazmi find an apartment. Multiple sources told investigators they believed the latter helpful Saudi had been a Saudi government agent.

Later, when 9/11 Commission staff gained limited access to these individuals in Saudi Arabia, the aides’ reaction was caustic. One memo described the testimony of one of them as “deceptive...inconsistent...implausible.” The testimony of another displayed an “utter lack of credibility.”

TWO HIJACKERS LIVED WITH FBI INFORMANT

Graham is troubled by what he sees as FBI headquarters’ persistent apparent effort to conceal information, including the fact that Mihdhar and Hazmi lived for months in California in the home of a paid FBI informant. Even when that emerged, the FBI denied his Inquiry access to the informant. Graham wonders if that was merely because of the Bureau’s embarrassment, or because the informant knew something that “would be even more damaging were it revealed.”

The newly surfaced FDLE documents containing Hammoud’s troubling 2004 information about al-Hijji have reinforced Graham’s concerns because they conflict with the FBI’s public statements.

Hammoud’s statement that al-Hijji introduced him to Broward’s own Saudi terror suspect, Shukrijumah, is consistent with the report that Prestancia gate logs showed Shukrijumah had visited the al-Hijji house – and buttresses longstanding official

suspicion that he was linked to the hijackers. When Mohamed Atta visited a federal immigration office in Miami to discuss a visa problem in May 2001, a 9/11 Commission footnote reports, a man who closely resembled Shukrijumah accompanied him.

Graham sees what he believes to be the suppression of evidence pointing to Saudi support for the 9/11 hijackers as arising from the perceived advantages to the West, at the time and now, of keeping Saudi Arabia happy.

In late December, the U.S. announced a new \$30 billion defense deal with the Saudis.

"This agreement serves to reinforce the strong enduring relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia," said U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Political-Military Affairs Andrew Shapiro. "It demonstrates the U.S. commitment to a strong Saudi defense capability as a key component to regional security."

Graham said he was taken aback by that announcement.

"I think that in the period immediately after 9/11 the FBI was under instructions from the Bush White House not to discuss anything that could be embarrassing to the Saudis," he said. "It is more inexplicable why the Obama administration has been reticent to pursue the question of Saudi involvement. For both administrations, there was and continues to be an obligation to inform the American people through truthful information."

Dan Christensen is the editor of Broward Bulldog. Anthony Summers is the co-author of "The Eleventh Day: The Full Story of 9/11 and Osama bin Laden" published by Ballantine Books.

FBI found direct ties between 9/11 hijackers and Saudis living in Florida; Congress kept in dark

Filed under [9/11](#)

By Anthony Summers and Dan Christensen, BrowardBulldog.org



United Airlines Flight 175 hits the World Trade Center's south tower

Just two weeks before the 9/11 hijackers slammed into the Pentagon and World Trade Center, members of a Saudi family abruptly left their luxury home near Sarasota, leaving a brand new car in the driveway, a refrigerator full of food, fruit on the counter — and an open safe in the master bedroom.

In the weeks to follow, law enforcement agents not only discovered the home was visited by vehicles used by the hijackers, but phone calls were linked between the home and those who carried out the death flights — including leader Mohamed Atta — in discoveries never before revealed to the public.

Ten years after the deadliest attack of terrorism on U.S. soil, new information has emerged that shows the FBI found troubling ties between the hijackers and residents in the upscale community in southwest Florida, but the investigation wasn't reported to Congress or mentioned in the 9/11 Commission Report.

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Graham, the Florida Democrat who cochaired the bipartisan congressional Joint Inquiry into the attacks, said he should have been told about the findings, saying it “opens the door to a new chapter of investigation as to the depth of the Saudi role in 9/11. ... No information relative to the named people in Sarasota was disclosed.”

The U.S. Justice Department, the lead agency that investigated the attacks, refused to comment, saying it will discuss only information already released.

The Saudi residents then living at the stylish home, Abdulazzi al-Hijjii and his wife Anoud, could not be reached, nor could the then owner of the house, Esam Ghazzawi, who is Anoud's father. The house was sold in 2003, records show.

GRAHAM HAS QUESTIONS

For Graham, who served as Florida's governor from 1979 to 1987, the connections between the hijackers and residents raise questions about whether other Saudi nationals in Florida knew of the impending attacks, which killed nearly 3,000 people.

The FBI investigation began the month after 9/11 when Larry Berberich, senior administrator and security officer of the gated community known as Prestancia, reported a bizarre event that took place two weeks before the hijackings of four passenger jets that originated in Boston, Newark and Washington.

The couple, living with their small children at the three-bedroom home at 4224 Escondito Circle, had left in a hurry in a white van, probably on Aug. 30.

They abandoned three recently registered vehicles, including a brand-new Chrysler PT Cruiser, in the garage and driveway.

After 9/11, Berberich said he had "a gut feeling" the people at the home may have had something to do with the attacks, prompting the FBI's probe that would eventually link the hijackers to the house.

As an advisor to the Sarasota County sheriff — Berberich was with the group that received President Bush during his aborted visit to a Sarasota school on the morning of 9/11. He alerted sheriff's deputies.

Patrick Gallagher, one of the Saudis' neighbors, had become suspicious even earlier, and had fired off an email to the FBI on the day of the attacks. Gallagher said law enforcement officers arrived and began an investigation, with agents swarming "all over the place, in their blue jackets," he recalled.

Jone Weist, president of the group that managed Prestancia, confirmed the arrival of the FBI, which requested copies of the Saudis' financial transactions involving the house.

SIGNS OF A FAST EXIT

Berberich and a senior counterterrorism agent said they were able to get into the abandoned house, ultimately finding "there was mail on the table, dirty diapers in one of the bathrooms ... all the toiletries still in place ... all their clothes hanging in the closet ... TVs ... opulent furniture, equal or greater in value than the house ... the pool running, with toys in it."



Inside the home at 4224 Escondito Circle

"The beds were made ... fruit on the counter ... the refrigerator full of food. ... It was like they went grocery shopping. Like they went out to a movie ... [But] the safe was open in the master bedroom, with nothing in it, not a paper clip. ... A computer was still there. A computer plug in another room, and the line still there. Looked like they'd taken [another] computer and left the cord."

The counterterrorism officer, who requested his name not be disclosed, said agents went on to make troubling discoveries: Phone records and the Prestancia gate records linked the house on Escondito Circle to the hijackers.

In addition, three of the four future hijackers had lived in Venice — just 10 miles from the house — for much of the year before 9/11.

Atta, the leader, and his companion Marwan al-Shehhi, had been learning to fly small airplanes at Huffman Aviation, a flight school on the edge of the runway at Venice Municipal Airport.

A block away, at Florida Flight Training, accomplice Ziad Jarrah was also taking flying lessons. All three obtained their pilot licenses and afterwards, in the months that led to 9/11, spent much of their time traveling the state, including stints in Hollywood, Fort Lauderdale and Delray Beach, among other areas.

The counterterrorism agent said records of incoming and outgoing calls made at the Escondito house were obtained from the phone company under subpoena.

Agents were able to conduct a link analysis, a system of tracking calls based on dates, times and length of conversations — finding the Escondito calls dating back more than a year, "lined up with the known suspects."

The links were not only to Atta and his hijack pilots, the agent said, but to 11 other terrorist suspects, including Walid al-Shehri, one of the men who flew with Atta on the first plane to strike the World Trade Center.

Another was Adnan Shukrijumah, a former Miramar resident identified as having been with Atta in the spring of 2001. Shukrijumah is still at large and is on the FBI's Most Wanted list.

But it was the gate records at the Prestancia development that produced the most telltale information.

People who arrived by car had to give their names and the home's address they were visiting. Gate staff would sometimes ask to see a driver's license and note the name, said Berberich.

LICENSE PLATES PHOTOGRAPHED

More importantly, he added, the license plates of cars pulling through the gate were photographed.

Atta is known to have used variations of his name, but the license plate of the car



he owned was on record.

The vehicle and name information on Atta and Jarrah fit that of drivers entering Prestancia on their way to visit the home at 4224 Escondito Circle, said Berberich and the counterterrorism officer.

Sarasota County property records identify the owners of the house at the time as Ghazzawi and his American-born wife Deborah, both with a post office box in al-Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and another address in the capital, Riyadh.

Ghazzawi was described as a middle-aged financier and interior designer, the owner of many properties, including several in the United States, said the counterterrorism agent.

While Ghazzawi visited the house, the people living there were his daughter Anoud and her husband al-Hijji, who appeared to be in his 30s and once identified himself as a college student, said Berberich, who met the son-in-law.

The couple's sudden departure two weeks before 9/11 was tracked in detail by the FBI after the attacks, the counterterrorism agent said.

First, they traveled to a Ghazzawi property in Arlington, Va., then — with Esam Ghazzawi — via Dulles airport and London's Heathrow, to Riyadh.

The counterterrorism agent said Ghazzawi and al-Hijji had been on a watch list at the FBI and that a U.S. agency involved in tracking terrorist funds was interested in both men even before 9/11.

"464 was Ghazzawi's number," the officer said. "I don't remember the other man's number."

About a year after the family abandoned the home, the FBI made an attempt to lure the owner back.

Scott McKay, a Sarasota lawyer for the Prestancia homeowners' association in its claim for unpaid dues on the property, said the FBI tried to get him to bring the Saudis back for the transaction.

"They didn't say you must do this. It was more like, 'But we'd really, really like you to make this happen,'" said McKay said.

McKay said he tried to get the Ghazzawis to sign the necessary documents in person, but the ploy failed because the documents could legally be signed elsewhere using a notary. Records show Ghazzawi's signature was notarized by the vice consul of the U.S. embassy in Lebanon in September 2003. Deborah Ghazzawi's signature was notarized in Riverside County, Calif.

CONGRESSIONAL INQUIRY KEPT IN DARK



Former Florida U.S. Senator Bob Graham

During an interview on Sunday, Graham said he was surprised he wasn't told about the probe when he was co-chair of Congress' Joint Inquiry into 9/11 — even though he was especially alert to terrorist information relating to Florida.

“At the beginning of the investigation,” he said, “each of the intelligence agencies, including the FBI, was asked to provide all information that agency possessed in relation to 9/11.”

The fact that the FBI did not tell the Inquiry about the Florida discoveries, Graham says, is similar to the agency's failure to provide information linking members of the 9/11 terrorist team to other Saudis in California until congressional investigators discovered it themselves.

The Inquiry did nevertheless accumulate a “very large” file on the hijackers in the United States, and later turned it over to the 9/11 Commission. “They did very little with it,” Graham said, “and their reference to Saudi Arabia is almost cryptic sometimes. ... I never got a good answer as to why they did not pursue that.”

The final 28-page section of the Inquiry's report, which deals with “sources of foreign support for some of the Sept. 11 hijackers,” was entirely blanked out. It was kept secret from the public on the orders of former President George W. Bush and is still withheld to this day, Graham said.

This in spite of the fact that Graham and his Republican counterpart, U.S. Sen. Richard Shelby of Alabama, both concluded the release of the pages would not endanger national security.

The grounds for suppressing the material, Graham believes, were “protection of the Saudis from embarrassment, protection of the administration from political embarrassment ... some of the unknowns, some of the secrets of 9/11.”

Anthony Summers is co-author of The Eleventh Day: The Full Story of 9/11 and Osama bin Laden, published last month by Ballantine Books, an imprint of Random House. Dan Christensen is the editor of the Broward Bulldog.

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